

## **A Concept of Time and Space in Asian Artistic Expression**

Ramón Pagayon Santos

Ever since the concept of art and its separate disciplinary categories were adopted outside Europe, countless expressive forms from non-European societies have suffered the short-end of comparative inquiry, resulting in various levels of marginalization not only in terms of definition but also in their relative value as sociocultural phenomenon. In the post-colonial era and in the post-modern world, Asian expressive cultures have gained better appreciation not only for their distinctive aesthetic and theoretical constructs, but as sources of new artistic thought in the global field of contemporary expression.

In order to appreciate the distinctions by which Asian expressive forms derive their aesthetic identity, it might be useful to view Asian art forms in the context of a contemporary society whose present-day structures have evolved through centuries of Western cultural influence, had replaced institutions that previously nurtured the aesthetic life of Asians in pre-colonial times. The courts and temples for example, which used to provide both spiritual and temporal direction to the peoples of Asia, have given way to secular bureaucracies and corporate organizations in attending to cultural and aesthetic needs of the modern Asian society. The advent of electronic technology and the use of machines in practically all forms of human activity including communication, has greatly affected the character of Asian expressive cultures. Moreover, modern education developed in the West has created an Asian bourgeoisie and a new aristocracy whose ideas of art and culture stem from Western concepts and theory.

The debate whether the entire phenomenon of change in post-colonial Asia is a positive or negative development is an issue that will never find a satisfactory answer. Nevertheless, it might be apropos to our concerns to view some very interesting offshoot of the dramatic transformations that have occurred in Asian societies today.

One remarkable change in the cultural matrix of modern Asian society is the adoption of the concept of art as a separate social activity, including the compartmentalized notion of the different artistic media

such as music, dance, theater, literature, etc. From the holistic concept of Asian expressive cultures, music for example, has been extracted as a separate artistic system and is further disjointed into areas of practice such as composition, performance, research, pedagogy, etc.

On the other hand, a more egalitarian view of peoples and their social symbols has resulted in the collapse of the distinctions and valuations between culturally distinctive categories of expression such as the classical or cultivate music, and folk, indigenous and orally transmitted practices. In modern artistic discourse, it means that different expressive species are regarded with equal significance in terms of their cultural and historical value, as well as their aesthetic and even theoretical constructs. While one might consider this change in social valuation as a welcome development, it also implies that modern Asian society has detached itself from the hierarchy of social meanings and values that these forms carried in their specific temporal and cultural domains. It is for this reason that I consider this present discussion as a way of recapturing the different levels of significance of Asian expressions as well as the great diversity of Asian cultures and artistic constructs that may have been homogenized along the way into a single concept of art and artistic production.

We are of course indebted to some leading Asian artists and thinkers who have rediscovered as well as revitalized in their modern works and recent writings the aesthetic foundations of Asian artistic expressions. Focusing on the elements of time and space, I would like to look into their manifestations in the expressive forms representing different social and cultural environments.

## **1. Time**

Many theories about time have been formulated from a universal as well as more specific and exclusive viewpoints, not only to explain time as both a cognitive and natural phenomenon, but more importantly, as one having a profound influence on the thinking, modes of perception, and in fact the entire conduct of societies and entire civilizations, but also on the nature and distinctiveness of their achievements and contributions to the life and history of mankind.

One general view is contained in J. T. Fraser's writing on time, as expressed in "five levels of temporality". They are arrayed according to a

scale of temporal cognition ranging from an absence of time (atemporality) to a consciousness of time in concrete segments and active units (noo-temporality). Another view is empirically supported by various ethnological and anthropological studies. This view holds the idea that each level of temporality may be perceived independently of, or more significantly than, another, such that this unique perception creates the cultural boundaries that provide identity and aesthetic particularity to different expressive practices.

In music, a concept of time is expressed and experienced in different structural properties, in the quality and quantity of sound and sound events, and most importantly in the relationships that govern the interaction and organization of these musical units. Concepts of unmeasured time, quantified time, linear and non-linear time (Kramer), cyclic time, spatial and durational time, are levels of perceived temporalities representing various philosophies and views of either physical and metaphysical realities. In musical discourse, time is reflected in the almost infinite variety of elements such as timbre, duration of sounds, rhythms, pulses, and concepts of organizational hierarchies and non-hierarchies.

The issue of linear and non-linear time is one that writers have taken up as reference in differentiating Western artistic expression from the other cultures. In characterizing Western music as the prime representation of linearity in time perception, one is immediately drawn to its structural and aesthetic foundations in counterpoint and harmony. The systems that have evolved in Western musical language is based on the psycho-acoustical logic of the harmonic partials and the ensuing contrapuntal and harmonic theories that are built on the hierarchic and semantic relations of intervals to a tonal center, that determine the levels of tension as well as the predictability or variability of its tonal direction. Even Western contemporary expression which purports to repudiate the concept of tonality as a determinant of form and musical syntax, is still based on bipolar logic covering the different parameters of music making; e.g. loud and soft, high and low, occurrence and recurrence, dissonance and consonance, tempered and non-tempered tuning, cause and effect, etc. Moreover, linearity as anchored to the concept of fixicity is manifested in the concept of form that requires a beginning, middle and end in order to define and fulfill the parameters of unity and closure.

With the above as point of reference on the dichotomy between linear and non-linear sense of temporality in musical thought, I would like

to look at three different types of musical expressions in Asia that clearly represent diverging time perceptions.

In his extensive studies of village music in Southeast Asia, the eminent composer-ethnomusicologist José Maceda formulated some very interesting theories in the field of temporal cognition and expression. From his classic article on “A Concept of Time in a Music of Southeast Asia” (1986), Maceda focused on the phenomenon of drone and melody and its different manifestations in the music of Southeast Asia as representing a concept of infinity, timelessness and equilibrium, whereby man and nature are hardly separated by temporal, physical and spatial boundaries. While it does not necessarily negate the existence of causal logic, its main source of aesthetic realization is in the qualities of sound, colors, decays, repetition, unmeasured time (absence of strong and weak beats), the absence of prescribed introduction and ending, and its interdependence with other expressive elements such as bodily movements and the environment.

One example of this is the *gangsá* (flat gong) music of the Kalinga or the Bontoc of Northern Philippines, where the drone matrix of interlocking rhythms of the different gong tones feature four gongs playing fixed patterns, while the other two improvise, with the implication that the music can continue to permute for an unprescribed duration of time. Another fascinating example of a musical drone is the music of the *bankakaw*, a hanging log drum of the Ata-Manobo in Southern Philippines. This music is played by four women, two on each side of the log drum. The interlocking rhythm is executed through alternating percussive strokes on the log drum in synchrony with bodily movements of the players. This particular musical exercise is part of a ritual in the agricultural cycle of the Ata-Manobo. More than the intriguing performance technique and the resulting drone-and-melody structural element of the music is their symbolic representation of shared labor in the life of the Ata-Manobo, a community whose spiritual and material survival is strongly attached to the agricultural land of their ancestral domain.

In the two musical examples from the Bontoc and Ata-Manobo agricultural rituals, the music is not bound by the finite formal framework of beginning, middle and end, but a music that is realized by the collective volition of its several participants, each contributing a particular element different from another on a time spectrum that is spontaneously created by such collective volition. The sharing and contribution of each participant is a direct manifestation of the highly communal existence of village soci-

eties in which life is sustained through interactive occupational endeavors within the temporal framework of recurring seasons and cycles of events.

From a modern creative perspective, the phenomenon of unmeasured time is the central focus of José Maceda's composition entitled *Colors Without Rhythm* composed in 1999. In this music, Maceda capitalized on the element of repetitive constancy in a way that practically negates a concept of time based on pulse divisions, phrases and periods. Furthermore, Maceda exploited the resonance and lingering colors of the keyboard percussion instruments in order to effect a transcendence of pulses and other temporal regions which are simultaneously defined by other percussion instruments as well as the strings and winds.

In the classical East Asian music, a very different concept of time may be experienced. In this regard, I would like to refer and defer to two prominent Asian composers, Isang Yun from Korea and the Chinese American Chou Wen-Chung, who developed their compositional ethos from the concept of a "single tone" phenomenon in Asian classical court and temple music traditions. According to Yun,

notes can be compared to brush strokes as opposed to pencil lines. From beginning to end, each note is consciously employed as a means of expression. A note's changes in pitch are regarded less as intervals forming a melody than as an ornamental function and part of the range of expression of one and the same note. (Feliciano 1983: 48)

In his talks and writings, Chou has advocated the revival of the aesthetic views of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, which according to him, are a "most fundamental force in shaping the course of East Asian music" (Ryker 1991: 32). Part of these aesthetic views is the triadic integration of language, tone and imagery or poetry, music, and painting, as well as the representation of the cosmos in the musical sphere – the sound of the earth, the heaven and the human being. (It can be noted that a similar concept "Music of the Spheres" existed in Western medieval philosophy.)

Thus, the "single tone" music represents a different category of temporality in that while one entire musical piece may consist of a series of "single tone" elements, each "tone" is a piece by itself representing its own temporal space in a larger temporal environment, like a single Chinese character within a field of characters in the art of calligraphy.

One fine illustration is the court music of Korea – Chong-Ak. Our example is entitled *Sujech'on*, one of the most beloved pieces of court music. It is also known as *Pitharak Chongup*. It is played by the standard wind

orchestra called *kwun-ak*, consisting of flutes, oboes, drums and bowed string. Another example of the “single-tone” principle is taken from the modern Asian music literature. The piece entitled *Yu-Ko*, was written by Chou Wen-Chung in 1965, scored for violin, alto flute, English horn, bass clarinet, trombone, bass trombone, piano and two percussion. One will note the isolation of single tone structures within a single melodic framework, a clear simulation of the single brush strokes in Chinese calligraphy. *Yu-Ko* is based on an ancient *ch’in* melody of a “fisherman’s song”. In giving life to each single stroke or tone, Chou amplified inflections in pitch, articulation, timbre, dynamics and rhythm.

While East Asian aesthetics centers on individualism and highly subjective representation, the classical traditions that flourished in the courts of Southeast Asia reflect a different conceptual framework. In Javanese gamelan music, a concept of time is more elaborately expressed by the various families of instruments, each having a characteristic timbre and resonance. On the basis of these sound events, each instrumental group serves a specific musical as well as temporal function in the so-called “colotomic” structure of the music. In this tonal-temporal “hierarchy”, the clear and brilliant *sarons* play the *balungan* or the nuclear theme; the long vibrating *gendhers* and the supple tones of the *bonang* play the ornaments; the flat sound of the *ketuk* divides the *kenongan* into smaller periods, the larger *kenong* marks the medium-sized phrases, and the big *gong ageng* underlines the largest division or the *gongan*. Thus, Javanese gamelan compositions or *ghending* are realized through the relationship of the different temporal spaces created or filled in by the natural tonal durations of each instrumental type or grouping.

As Javanese gamelan music embodies a concept of temporality in its cyclicity, beat structures, and in the hierarchic colotomy of its tonal durations, it likewise illustrates a spatial dimension in ensemble music making not only in Indonesia but in other Southeast Asian repertoires as well. Just like its temples and edifices, the court music’s that have evolved in such countries as Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, are conceived as architectural entities, in which the different parts and layers that are made up of varying degrees of tonal and rhythmic complexity are all controlled and supported by an underlying nuclear melody, or what we might consider as the structural foundation of the larger musical infrastructure.

In the following example, we can easily identify corresponding structural elements between the vertical and horizontal spatial designs of the

stupas that compose that entire temple complexes of Boroubudur, Prambanan and Angkor Wat, and the hierarchic divisions (*ketukan*, *kenongan*, *gongan*) that comprise the entire sonic space of a piece of Javanese gamelan music.

## LANCARAN MANYAR SEWU SL. 6

(Excerpted from *Sri Lestari* by Sundardi Wisnusubroto)

[illegible]

- |           |   |                |
|-----------|---|----------------|
| <b>BL</b> | = | Balungan       |
| <b>T</b>  | = | Kethuk         |
| <b>N</b>  | = | Kenong         |
| <b>P</b>  | = | Kempul         |
| <b>G</b>  | = | Gong           |
| <b>SP</b> | = | Saron Penerus  |
| <b>BB</b> | = | Bonang Barung  |
| <b>BP</b> | = | Bonang Penerus |
| <b>KD</b> | = | Kendhang       |

## 2. Space

The perception and use of space in Asian artistic production are also quite distinctive for their symbolic and subtle character rather than a preference for realism. In Asian theater, the body can be considered as the central space by which an entire symbolic language is articulated. In the same token, such language contains its own vocabularies that can express not only multiple emotional and ideational nuances, but also the relationship of the body and spirit to both physical and metaphysical environments.

The classical dances of India, like the Bharata-Natyam and the Kathakali Dance Drama from Kerala, are all centered on the body as the source and medium of both the spiritual and material message. The body itself serves as the space in which idea and language are conveyed. The exteriority of these dances are represented not so much by the physical space but by one of the four expressional meaning and symbolisms, called *abhayabhinaya* or the external. This indicates that the expressive mood and background are conveyed by the costume, make-up, accessories and sets. (The others are the *angika* – hand gestures and postures; *vachikabhinaya* – the vocal-verbal and instrumental elements; and the *satvikabhinaya* – the psychological element as conveyed by the eyes and the entire being of the performer.)

In Chinese theater, the physical limitation of the stage has been expanded to almost unlimited spatial possibilities through the use of symbolic action. In this regard, kinetic language, imagination and sonic communication all combine to create a unique aesthetic field that is almost boundless in terms of real time-real space parameters. To quote from the book *Peking Opera and Mei Lanfang*:

Acting in Peking Opera is not subjected to the limitations of time and space; here symbolism is essential. Since some activities in everyday life cannot possibly be reproduced on stage, Peking Opera gives expression to them in a symbolic way... Circling the stage, whip in hand, suggests riding a horse... walking in a circle indicates a long journey... on a stage bare of scenery, a performer holding an oar or paddle and doing kneebends to simulate a heavy swell, demonstrates traveling on a boat... The scenery used in modern theater is out of place on the Peking Opera stage, because it would only serve to restrict the performers' acting. The setting is created entirely by a performer's acting which mentally brings the audience to any place where the story of the drama takes place... There is a saying: "Small as the stage is, a few steps will bring you far beyond heaven". (Wu/Huang/Shawu 1981, 3-4)



The highly concentrated nature of Asian artistic expression, which Western art scholarship has branded as “minimalist” compared to the highly quantitative theoretical frameworks of Western art forms, is another dimension of spatiality in Asian aesthetic construct. Going back to the music as a point of reference, the phenomenon of a limited tonal space can be found in the traditional repertoires, whether of classical or non-classical vintage. In the case of the former, the previous discussion on the “single tone” concept in the musical design in the court and temple music of East Asia presents indeed the classic illustration of the other extremity of the tonal-spatial spectrum *vis à vis* the multiplicity and complexity of the tonal matrix that has been a constant benchmark of Western musical expression from the middle ages to the present.

Let us look at traditional cultural expression from a different social environment in which musical expressions are realized with unique modalities that are made up of extremely “limited” tonal space. One illustration is the music of the Yakan, a cultural community that is prominently situated in the island of Basilan of the Sulu archipelago in Southern Philippines. While the entire gamut of the cultural traditions of the Yakan – from textile, bodily ornaments, music and dances – are striking of their color and vibrancy, they are all sourced out from extremely modest spatial materiality. In music, the principal melodic instruments of the Yakan consist only of five pitches, be it the xylophone (*gabbang*), the array of graduated bossed gongs (*kwintangan*), or the hanging log percussion (*kwintangan kayu*).



Among the five pitches, one is in octave, which also serves as both the “tonic” and the drone tone. Yakan instrumental music generally alluded to as *tagunggo* (music making, sounding) is both highly concentrated as to the size of its short melodic units (*lebad*), but also highly unpredictable and unlimited in its improvisational possibilities. In similar fashion to the exploration of the limited space in Asian theater and dances, the *tagunggo* music of the Yakan is an endless exploration of the relationships between the highly concentrated pitch set of the tonal mode in terms of articulating different melodic-rhythmic patterns as well as their permutations, repetitions and juxtapositions.



In what one might distinguish as an Asian aesthetic dimension in the conceptual and experiential view of space, one observation is that its general characteristic of reductive concentration is counterbalanced by the multiplicity and variability of its organism. Whether the expressive form emanates from the East Asian “single-tone” principle and the cellular modalities of village musical systems, or the layered textures of Southeast Asian ensemble music, space is always realized as a non-bounded environment by the manner in which it is dynamically explored by the highly individualized yet spontaneous participation of its parts and players. These individual contributions make up the expressive complex whose unpredicated unfolding is guided by a syntactic order whose very nature effects the flexibility, as well as the linear ambiguity, if not unpredictability, of Asian artistic expression. This phenomenon, which results from the dynamic relationship between individualized improvisation, modal framework, and pre-existing structural materials, serves as a common systemic infrastructure of formal ensemble music of Cambodia (*pin peat*), Thailand (*piphat*) and the different gong chime orchestras of Indonesia.

A more literal representation of the spatial dimension in Asian expressive culture is the incorporation of the physical environment as basic factor in the experiential process. More than merely an acoustical dimension in the realm of musical expression, both physical space and sonic space are equally shared by all participants, whether by the principal players or the community of spectators and listeners. This sense of mutuality and spatial spontaneity is very much distinct from the highly structured

and hierarchical relationship between audience, performers, and support personnel in the European expressive arena. In Asian ritual practices, the open space provides a freer artistic and spiritual interaction, perhaps even a replication of the natural environment in which aesthetic order is realized through the harmonious yet dynamic commingling of distinctive shapes, colors and sounds.

An illustration of this spatial concept is the modern piece by the young Filipino composer Jonas Baes, entitled *Banwa* (meaning “community” or country). The music, which is realized through guided improvisation by both “performers” and audience,

explores the possibilities of incorporating the public into a composition, transforming the performance itself into an “imaginary” community. *Banwa* features the fluctuating sound of four bamboo scrapers located in four corners of a room. A gradual increase of density occurs when these four players distribute bamboo bird whistles to a group of people around the room. Together, the two opposing sounds of the scrapers and bird whistles produce a sound environment similar to the diffused sounds in a forest. (Baes 1998)

In this particular piece, any sound, accidental or intentional, becomes part of the entire musical matrix.

Another illustration is the piece composed by the author in 1999 entitled *Tang-Gong-Gong-An* for four pianists and forty gongs. The main thrust of the piece however is to explore the world of non-tempered music. Its formal structure is determined by the different qualities of the instruments as well as their sonic behavior and movement that is defined by the polarity between tempered (the two pianos played by four pianists) and non-tempered instruments (the 40 gongs which are not specifically prescribed).

Its conceptual construct is based on Asian music ensemble performance where layers of rhythmic and melodic motifs create larger musical entities. Moreover, sound colors and pitch registers of contribute much to the piece’s fundamental idea of a continuous but ever-permuting band of sonic motion. There is an absence of a concept of phrase. Each musical event is related to a larger textural matrix of interlocking events in constant repetitive flux.

In conclusion, time and space are two distinct yet inseparable characteristics in Asian artistic expression that sets it apart from the aesthetic framework of other artistic traditions, most especially the European expressive repertoires. To be viewed as the prime factors in contributing to

the holism in Asian art forms, they are not only indicators of aesthetic identity, but a reflection of social and spiritual philosophies that shape, guide, and govern Asian life and culture.

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